

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 21 April 2022 at 10.30 am

Meeting held in hybrid format at Riverside House and via Microsoft Teams

Present

Consumer Panel/ACOD

Rick Hill (Chair)
Amanda Britain
Helen Froud
Clifford Harkness
Sian Phipps
Richard Spencer
Michael Wardlow
Richard Williams

Apologies

Kay Allen

In attendance

Jenny Borridd
Lisa Bowerbank (attended item 8)
Fiona Lennox
Chloe Newbold
Ofcom colleagues

Item
1. Welcome and introduction
1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting.
2. Declarations of Members' interests
2.1 Rick Hill declared that he had been appointed a Member of the Civil Aviation Authority's Consumer Panel.
2.2 Amanda Britain declared that she no longer held an advisory role in Scottish Government.
3. Minutes of the meeting on 17 March 2022 and matters arising
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 17 March 2022 were APPROVED , subject to minor

amendments.

3.2 The Panel asked for further information on whether, as part of Ofcom's work around the telephony USO, it had engaged with any sectors in the devolved Nations that remained reliant on fax services e.g. healthcare authorities.

3.3 Members asked for more granular detail on why complaints relating to complaints handling had recently increased.

4. Chair's update

4.1 The Panel noted the Chair's update, which provided an overview of the Panel's recent activities.

4.2 The Chair recorded his thanks to Graham Mather, an Ofcom Board Member who was responsible for liaising with the Panel and keeping Ofcom's Board apprised of the Panel's ongoing work to help strengthen the voice of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses in the communications sector.

4.3 Members discussed the potential benefits of including tracking within the postal USO, having recently attended roundtable events hosted by Royal Mail across the UK Nations on the future of postal services. The Panel sought to further understand Ofcom's policy position on including tracking in the USO.

5. Consumer and enforcement update

5.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom's consumer policy and enforcement team. Members were provided with an overview of Ofcom's consumer priority areas and recent activity across the enforcement team.

5.2 Members were advised that Ofcom's consumer policy team had recently updated Ofcom's Board on its approach to consumer protection and future challenges. The Panel had previously participated in a workshop on the topic and looked forward to receiving an update at a future meeting.

5.3 Members asked for further information on Ofcom's ongoing work to understand how communications providers (CPs) recorded consumer vulnerability data.

5.4 The Panel welcomed BT's recent announcement that it would pause VoIP migrations for consumers who did not 'opt-in' and considered that the moratorium would provide industry the opportunity to learn from the issues identified. It was also noted that Virgin Media had also paused migrations for some consumers. Members highlighted the benefits of CPs working collaboratively with other organisations such as alarm receiving centres and local authorities to identify consumers who could require additional support.

5.5 The Panel remained concerned about the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on communications consumers and asked to receive an update on Ofcom's research on the affordability of communications services. Members also noted that Ofcom was currently consulting on amending its 'Treating Vulnerable Customers Fairly' guidance to strengthen support for financially vulnerable consumers - and sought clarity on the timeline for any potential changes to come into effect.

5.6 The Panel stressed that 2G/3G switch-off could significantly affect people living in remote and rural areas and raising consumer awareness and sharing mobile coverage plans well in advance was critical. Ofcom colleagues advised that the team would be invited to provide an update at a future meeting. Members also commented:

- that some areas might be deemed as having decent mobile coverage but the day-to-day reality for consumers could differ where connectivity was poor or non-existent. Members asked for further information on which areas across the UK were currently reliant on 3G and could become 'not-spots' following 3G switch-off.
- that 2G/3G switch-off could have a detrimental impact on financially vulnerable consumers who currently used 3G handsets and would be forced to upgrade to a new device. The Panel asked if CPs would put in place any mitigations to protect consumers from additional costs that arose as a consequence of the switch-off.

5.7 The Panel discussed Ofcom's Fairness Commitments and how signatories' performance would be monitored moving forward. Members urged Ofcom not to lose sight of the value of the Commitments and the importance of having a regular monitoring mechanism in place. Ofcom colleagues advised that discussions were ongoing, and the policy team would attend a future meeting to seek the Panel's views early-on.

5.8 Members asked if it was possible to understand from Ofcom's CCT data whether consumers who had migrated to VoIP experienced fewer nuisance calls.

5.9 The Panel's Member for Wales asked if the number of telecoms complaints received was higher in Wales compared to the other UK Nations.

6. Adults' Media Literacy

6.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's recently published Adults' Media Use and Attitudes and Adults' Media Lives annual reports.

6.2 Members discussed the findings with interest and raised the importance of engaging with consumers who were less likely to engage online and/or had additional access requirements. Again, the Panel encouraged Ofcom to adopt an inclusive approach across its research programme, using the social model of disability rather than the medical model.

6.3 Members also received an overview of, and discussed Ofcom's recently published Digital Exclusion Review. Members commented:

- that digitally excluded groups were likely to experience multiple layers of deprivation and it was important to understand why some people were at greater risk of being digitally excluded.
- that a recent presentation by Digital Inclusion Wales had highlighted that lack of digital connectivity significantly increased for consumers living in supported housing. In addition, some consumers lacked the digital skills to participate safely online and could be susceptible to scams.
- that consumers living in areas where community support was available were likely to find it easier to connect digitally, and suggested that it would be a valuable exercise to understand the support available in different areas.
- that research about 'households' usually does not include those living in other settings, such as supported housing or care homes.

7. Children's Media Literacy

7.1 The Panel was provided with the key findings of Ofcom's Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes 2022 report. The Panel discussed the findings and noted that these would be shared with stakeholders at an upcoming event.

7.2 Members commented that schools could play a significant role in educating children on online safety, noting that some schools already took an active role, however curriculums and policies widely differed across the UK Nations. It was also noted that parents and children needed to receive clear, cohesive, and easy to understand information on online safety to avoid confusion.

8. Research update

8.1 The Panel received an update on its research and insights programme and discussed the key emerging findings from its ongoing research projects.

9. Royal Mail barcoded stamps update

9.1 The Panel received an update on Royal Mail's recent announcement to phase out non-barcoded stamps by 31 January 2023 and implement a 'swap-out' scheme for consumers who were in possession of non-barcoded stamps.

9.2 The Panel raised significant concerns about the consumer implications of the changes, which were likely to disproportionately affect consumers who were considered 'vulnerable' and could find it difficult to engage with the 'swap-out' scheme due to limited channels of engagement. Specifically, the Panel raised concerns that the scheme could be inaccessible to consumers with additional access requirements and/or those who lacked digital skills/were digitally excluded; and did not feature a consumer dispute

resolution scheme. The Chair advised that he would raise the Panel's concerns with Royal Mail directly.

9.3 The Panel also expressed its concern that it had not been notified of the intended policy when it was in development, to enable it to feed in the consumer voice. Given the Panel's remit, it should be notified as a matter of course. Ofcom undertook to remind Royal Mail of its obligation.

9.4 The Panel asked whether Ofcom had considered how the new barcoded stamps could broaden consumer protections e.g. introduce auto-compensation for delayed parcels.

10. Climate change update

10.1 Ofcom's climate change team provided an overview of Ofcom's regulatory context, how it related to environmental matters, and forthcoming, related activities.

10.2 Members commented:

- that it was important to transition to net-zero fairly and inclusively.
- on the importance of considering the project holistically across the sector.
- that the policy should also consider the issue of technology waste.
- that technological developments within the communications sector could have a detrimental impact on the environment.
- that the potential impacts of communications policies on the environment should be considered early-on in communications policy development.
- that there is a potential tension between competition and good environmental outcomes e.g. the parcel delivery sector.

11. AOB

11.1 Members highlighted that it should be made clear within the Panel's research that the number of consumers identified as 'vulnerable' across the communications sector was significantly low and the true figure was likely to be much greater. It was also noted that the term 'vulnerable' was problematic as not all consumers who required additional support would consider themselves as vulnerable.

11.2 The Panel's Member for England highlighted that one of the Panel's stakeholders had undertaken an exercise to map poverty across England and Wales and suggested that a similar exercise could be undertaken for mobile coverage to identify areas where overlapping detriment was likely to exist.